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ABSTRACT

A stratified random sample of 1,500 state legislators from 12 states was surveyed regarding their perceptions and knowledge of issues in reading instruction. The states were selected to provide a balanced mix of state sizes, state budget sizes, and geographic regions. Within states, legislators were selected to balance districts. Both mail surveys and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted. Most legislators believed the following four adult literacy instruction-related issues to be unresolved: assessment; "whole language" versus "basal" approaches; use of authentic materials versus workbooks; and whether instructional time for at-risk readers should focus on actually reading or practicing isolated reading skills. Approximately two-thirds of the legislators reported that their states were implementing new assessment programs but did not know whether the new assessment programs matched existing curricula. The legislators also pleaded ignorance about issues related to curriculum and instruction, indicating their belief that research on those issues is still in the "discovery" stage. More than 70% of those surveyed relied on the following sources of information about reading-related issues: newspaper articles, magazine articles, radio and television broadcasts, and personal contacts with specialists in the field. The main implication of this study is that local adult literacy program planners must begin/improve campaigns to inform state legislators about literacy issues. (MN)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research to Practice

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Issues in Reading Instruction: U.S. State Legislators' Perceptions and Knowledge

D. R. Reutzel, P. M. Hollingsworth, & S. A. Cox

During these days of legislative debate about the future of adult literacy funding, many of us question how best to keep lawmakers informed about our programs. The results of this research study may provide some answers to this critical question. Reutzel et al. surveyed a stratified, random sample of 1,500 U.S. state legislators to determine (a) their perceptions of critical issues in reading education, and (b) how they learned about reading-related issues. Some of the study focused on K-12 issues. Here we report results for issues that relate to adult literacy practices.

Method

Legislators from 12 U.S. states were randomly selected to participate in the study. State size, state budget, and U.S. region were balanced; within states, legislators were selected to balance districts.

Both mail surveys and follow-up telephone interviews were used to gather information. In each, legislators were asked to indicate (a) whether each of 11 reading issues was "resolved," "unresolved," or "never an issue" for them; (b) the three most important of their "unresolved" issues; (c) which of 15 possible information sources they used to learn about reading issues; and (d) whether they found each source used "quite helpful," "moderately helpful," or "not very helpful."

Results

Results of the mail survey showed that most legislators believed 4 issues to be unresolved: assessment, "whole language" vs. "basal" approaches, use of authentic materials vs. workbooks, and whether instructional time for at-risk readers should focus on actual reading or practicing isolated reading skills. Legislators rated the assessment issue as most important of these four issues.

Follow-up telephone interviews attempted to uncover more detail about legislators' assessment concerns. Approximately 2/3 said that their states were implementing new assessment programs, about which they believed educators lacked knowledge and ability. Two-thirds also indicated that they did not know if the new assessment programs matched their existing curricula, although the majority believed that assessment and instruction should be related but that assessment should not determine the selection of instructional materials. They also reported that they did not like standardized tests because they didn't give a complete picture.

Legislators pled ignorance about issues related to curricular and instructional issues (whole language vs. basals, authentic reading vs.

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isolated skills practice, etc.), stating beliefs that research is still at the "discovery" stage and that educators have not reached consensus about these issues.

Nevertheless, when they need to learn about issues such as this, they rely upon information that "just finds" them, expert testimony from educators, state departments of education, legislative research and surveys, information from constituents, and their own past educational experiences.

Results of the mail survey (which were confirmed in the telephone follow-ups) revealed that 70% or more of the legislators rely on 4 major sources of information about reading-related issues: newspaper articles, magazine articles, radio and TV broadcasts, and personal contacts with specialists in the field. Only the last source appeared on their "most helpful" list; in general, legislators do not find print and broadcast media information to be helpful.

Implications

A first step in thinking about the implications of this study for local adult literacy programs may be to consider legislators' knowledge and concerns. What do your legislators believe about adult literacy education? What do they know about current and pressing issues in our education? Do they know your concerns? Do they share your concerns? Are they aware of the links among literacy levels and solutions for economic and social problems, for example? Do they know about and value what your program accomplishes?

Next, programs may wish to formulate plans for keeping legislators apprised of relevant information about adult literacy issues. Do you routinely invite legislators to visit programs, for example? Are photos and articles about the legislators' visits in your local newspaper? Is someone on your staff a "personal contact" for legislators? Do you provide easily accessible and understandable information about program impact? Do you encourage legislators to contact state-level agencies, such as the Ohio Literacy Network (OLN) or the Ohio Literacy Resource Center (OLRC), for information about literacy in Ohio? Do you share OLRC publications of possible interest with your legislators?

Ultimately, we have to decide if efforts to inform and involve state legislators in adult literacy issues are worth our time and energy. As you and your colleagues consider this issue, we urge you to remember that "as demand for reform in educational funding occurs, state legislators will assume even more responsibility for allocation of resources.... Now is the time for educators to become involved by disseminating the 'best knowledge' available about reading education to their state policy makers to inform their choices and votes related to literacy policy and funding" (Reutzel et al., 1995, p. 17).

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